PRO FORMA: LANGUAGE/TEXT/VISUAL ART

volume 3

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On The Tower of Babel
An Annotated Translation of *Genesis* 11:1–9

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Introduction

In the poetry of the story of the Tower of Babel, the capacity of language for meaning is at a zenith. Syntax and content merge to demonstrate both the imperative and the impossibility of translation. The composer of this vivid allegory has repeatedly conjugated verbs to form words with associative meanings that touch their referents like tangents of a circle—only at a single point, but extending to infinity.

In Jacques Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel," "Babel" is translated "confusion." There are two versions of André Chouraqui's translation of the Bible into French. In the version that Derrida used and cited in his essay, the word "confusion" is inserted, in English, after the calling of the name "Babel." In the online version of Chouraqui's translation, there is no such insertion and certainly in the Hebrew, there is no word there to correspond. Two questions arise. One, is there any way to translate "Babel" with "confusion" and two, why this confusion about confusion, what does it hold together?

"Babel," bet, bet, lamed, is a proper name. It names the place. It is derived from the Akkadian for "gate of God." It is distinct from the word for "confuse" or "confound" which is *"balal," bet, lamed, lamed.* The Hebrew verb *"balal,"* to confuse or to mix, is from Akkadian, Arabic, Phoenician and/or Syriac roots. It is most likely that these two similar words and their meanings have become conflated only since the writing of the story of the Tower of Babel, which employs them in a pun.

The second question is the more difficult, partly because Derrida leaves aside a decisive investigation of the conflation of Babel with confusion in favour of a reading of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." But there, Derrida brings together the confounding of language and the gate of God by suggesting that the call for translation and the debt invoked, the inadequacies of language to truth—and to language—*are* the gate of God. Possibly, these could be held together in a number of ways.

וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֲחָדִים
2 וַיְהִי בְּנָסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בִקְעָה בְּאֶרֶץ
שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם 3 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ
הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים וְנִשְׂרְפָה לִשְׂרֵפָה וַתְּהִי
לָהֶם הַלְּבֵנָה לְאָבֶן וְהַחֵמָר הָיָה לָהֶם לַחֹמֶר
4 וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ
בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נָפוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־
הָאָרֶץ 5 וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־
הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם 6 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן
עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אֶחָת לְכֻלָּם וְזֶה הַחִלָּם
לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יָזְמוּ
לַעֲשׂוֹת 7 הָבָה נֵרְדָה וְנָבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם
אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ 8 וַיָּפֶץ
יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ
לִבְנֹת הָעִיר 9 עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם
בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׂפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הֱפִיצָם
יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָ

Genesis 11:1-9

1. And all the earth was[1] of one language[2] and unique[3] words[4].
2. And in journeying from the east[5] they found a valley[6] in the land of Shinar and they settled there. 3. And they said one to another, "Let us brick bricks[7] and fire fire[8]." And they had brick for stone[9] and bitumen was their mortar[10]. 4. And they said, "Let us build[11] ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky and make ourselves a name[12], not to be scattered over the face of all the earth. 5. And Yahweh[13] came down to see[14] the city and the tower that the children of Adam[15] built. 6. And Yahweh said, "They are one nation[16] and all of them of one language and this is what they begin[17] to do and now, anything they conspire[18] to do will not be beyond their reach[19]. 7. Let us[20] go down and confound[21] there their language so that they will not understand one another's language." 8. And Yahweh scattered them from there over the face of all the earth and they ceased[22] building the city. 9. Therefore he called the name "Babel,"[23] for there Yahweh confounded the language of all the earth and from there Yahweh scattered them over the face of all the earth.

1. The opening word of the passage, "*vayehi*," is the verb "to be" in the future tense, prefaced with the prefix letter *vuv*, which means "and" but often also—in its use in scripture—alters tense from past to future or vice versa.

2. "*Safah*," literally "lip." This is the first occurence of the word "*safah*" in scripture for the word "language." In *Genesis* ch.10, it is stated that the descendents of Japheth, Ham and Shem, the builders of the tower, were divided according to their languages. The word used for language in that context is "*lashon*," literally "tongue." That the builders of the tower were already of more than one tongue raises the question of what the confounding of language might be. In the garden of Eden, the animals of the field and the birds of the sky are brought before Adam and whatever he calls them becomes their name. The relation between a signifier and its object is one to one. After Babel this ceases to be the case.

3. "*Achadim*." This word, an adjective, the plural of one, appears in Hebrew scripture four times, most often making it appear to mean "a few." Only here is it separated from the word "one" by one word.

4. "*Dvarim*." The Hebrew word for "words," "*dvarim*," means also "things." Made plural by the suffix "*im*," as is "*achadim*," we have the rhyme "*dvarim achadim*"… singular things … unique speak…

5. "*Miqedem*." This word also means "from ancient times" or "from days gone by."

6. "*Biqah*." "Low flatland" or "valley." Related to the Arabic for "plain" or "valley," "*buqa*." In building a tower to reach the sky, why start in a valley?

7. Two Hebrew words of one root, verb and noun share similar

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9. Again, two Hebrew words of one root, an almost alliterative pair.

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11. The adjacent letters *bet* and *nun*, which occur in the words for "brick" and for "stone" are adjacent here in the word for "build" as well. Similar patterns occur in related Akkadian, Arabic, Aramaic, Moabite, Phoenician and Syriac words.

12. What might it be to "make a name?" In the *Zohar*, the fundamental text of Jewish mysticism, the making of a name is understood to be the praise of God for selfish purposes. According to Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman), thirteenth-century Spanish Torah scholar, the builders' attempt to make a name for themselves was a transgression comparable to that of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and so the confounding of language is compared to the banishment from the Garden of Eden. The making of a name may also be seen to resemble the making of a "graven" image—a striving for plastic representation—and therefore forbidden.

13. "*Yahweh.*" This is the not-to-be uttered name of God. Its letters and structure strongly suggest that it is a unique form of the verb "to be"—one that is neither past, present nor future, but possibly all three at once. As a proper name it is not translatable, but it is simultaneously a proper name and a unique verb. To the extent that there are two words here, they are at once homonyms and synonyms. Two identical words, one a name, one a verb or, two words, a verb and a name that both

have the same meaning.

14. According to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak), Torah commentator of eleventh-century France, that God comes down to see the city and the tower for himself teaches us never to judge without seeing with our own eyes.

15. The mention of Adam's name is one of the justifications for Ramban's comparison to the banishment from the Garden of Eden.

16. The first use in Hebrew scripture of the word for "nation" is associated with acquisitiveness but also a desire for unity and knowledge.

17. The third-person plural present tense conjugation of this verb makes it resemble the word for "the dream."

18. There is a connotation of evil intent.

19. The inaccessibility alluded to here is like that of a heavily fortified city.

20. God previously refers to himself in the plural in the creation of man: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Here, though, it echoes humanity's "Let us brick bricks and fire fire" and "let us build" of a few lines earlier.

21. The verb "balal," to confuse or to mix, shares Akkadian (balalu), Arabic (balla), Phoenician (balal) and Syriac (bal) roots. It occurs here in the first-person plural, and so the root is prefaced with a letter nun. The nun, bet configuration seen here in "let us go down and confound" upends the bet, nun of building with bricks for stones (note 11). In fact, the word for "confound" here is an anagram of the word for "brick." The confounding undoes the tower at its most elemental level.

22. That they all stopped at once is not insignificant. The word for "cease" in its third-person past conjugation here sequentially employs the consonants of the word for "together." Since the calling of the name "Babel," languages are uniformly inadequate to what is, to what we perceive, to what we think and to each other's language. This is precisely what we all have in common.

23. Or possibly, "Therefore he called its name 'Babel'…" or, "her name 'Babel'…". The Hebrew can equally be read either of these ways, i.e. "Babel" is the name of the place or the name of God, possibly both. The translation "the name 'Babel'…" preserves this ambiguity. But the proper name "Babel" is not to be confused with the common verb *"balal"* (note 21). "Babel" is derived from the Akkadian *"babilu,"* "gate of God." Still, after the calling of the name "Babel," translation becomes at once both imperative and impossible; imperative because the children of Adam ceased to understand one another, and impossible for the same reason. Whether interlinguistic translation, in which words of another language are substituted, or intralinguistic translation, in which an alternative idiom in the same language is employed, language and its signifiers—never fully identifying their objects or their signifieds—always compromise. Language is inadequate to truth and to language. Translation, which is always comprised of interpretation, is never enough. It is perhaps the task of the translator—if not the task of the translation—to illuminate this inadequacy. So Walter Benjamin's question about the holy growth of languages engendered in translation and the pure language that may await us remains: "How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?" The inadequacy of language is itself a sign.